

University of Missouri president resigns amid protests over racist incidents

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University of Missouri system President Tim Wolfe resigned Monday amid growing protests over racist incidents at the Columbia campus and his response to student and faculty concerns. Wolfe announced that he would step down immediately prior to a meeting called by the Board of Curators, the university's governing body.

Later Monday, University of Missouri-Columbia Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin announced that he would step down as of January 1.

Wolfe and Loftin's resignations follow months of protests at the university, also known as Mizzou, which is located in Columbia. It is about 120 miles west of Ferguson, where unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown was gunned down by police in August 2014.

Beginning in September, a series of on-campus incidents involving racist slurs and insults aimed at black students and groups prompted protests organized mainly by Concerned Citizen 1950, a student organization taking its name from the first year the state university admitted black students. As of 2014, 27,654 undergraduates were enrolled at the campus, and about 8 percent of them were black.

Tensions escalated on Monday, with a student on hunger strike, others camped out with him in solidarity, and faculty members canceling two days of classes in lieu of a teach-in. The Missouri Students Association also formally called for Wolfe's resignation in a letter to the Board of Curators Monday morning.

Dozens of Mizzou's black football players said they would not play next Saturday's game if Wolfe did not resign. After a meeting with the team on Sunday, Coach Gary Pinkel declared his support for the demonstrating players, posting a photo of him on Twitter with dozens of players, black and white, linking

arms.

In a joint statement with Mack B. Rhoades, the athletic director, Pinkel said Sunday that team practices and activities had been canceled to focus on resolving the impasse. The university stood to lose about \$1 million in television broadcast and other fees if the team forfeited their home game against Brigham Young University on Saturday.

Tensions have mounted at the campus since September, when the president of the Missouri Students Association, Payton Head, who is black, said a man had called him a racial epithet as he walked on campus. Chancellor Loftin waited for a week to respond to student protests over the incident.

In October, members of the Legion of Black Collegians, the black student government, reported that someone yelled a racial slur as they rehearsed for a play in a campus plaza. Then later that month, someone drew a swastika in feces in a bathroom in a new dormitory.

At the homecoming parade October 10, student protesters formed a human chain to block the parade route, standing in front of the car containing Wolfe. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that his car bumped into a protester. Wolfe "allowed his driver to try to drive around us, even hit one of us," said student Shelby Parnell.

Police moved protesters off the street, threatening them with arrest and pepper spray. In an interview, Parnell said Wolfe "did not intervene whatsoever," adding, "His silence is violence."

Black graduate student Jonathan Butler had begun a hunger strike on November 2, pledging to consume only water until Wolfe was removed. He had been joined by other students camping out on the university grounds.

On Friday night, students confronted the university president outside a fundraiser in Kansas City, challenging him to define “systematic oppression.” A video clip posted online shows him replying, “Systematic oppression is because you don’t believe that you have the equal opportunity for success,” before students cut him off.

Someone off camera then shouts, “Did you just blame us for systematic oppression, Tim Wolfe? Did you just blame black students?”

With such recurring incidents, and Wolfe’s continued indifference, it became clear that the writing was on the wall for the Mizzou president. Missouri’s Democratic Party political establishment, with little more than a year since the protests that rocked Ferguson, sought to head off protests on the campus.

Missouri’s attorney-general Chris Koster called on the university to set up a task force to address the students’ concerns. US Senator Claire McCaskill said the Board of Curators needed to “send a clear message” to the students that they would address racism, while Governor Jay Nixon issued a statement urging university officials to address the students’ concerns “to ensure the University of Missouri is a place where all students can pursue their dreams in an environment of respect, tolerance and inclusion.”

Speaking before Monday’s Board of Curators’ meeting, Wolfe said, “I ask everybody—from students to faculty to staff to my friends, everybody—use my resignation to heal and to start talking again.” He then read from scripture before calling on the university community “to use this resignation to heal, not to hate as we move forward today for a brighter tomorrow.”

Wolfe is a legitimate target of students’ anger and his words are unlikely to quell this discontent. He was brought on as president of the four-campus University of Missouri system in February 2012 with an annual salary of \$450,000 and a \$100,000 in bonus potential. He received free housing, a car allowance and a \$45,000 relocation fee.

As is becoming the trend at universities nationwide, Wolfe’s appointment marked the second consecutive time that a businessman rather than an educator was chosen for the MU position. His previous work was in computer sales and then management, at IBM, Covansys and Novell.

While the issue of racism at MU, and Wolfe’s

arrogant response, has drawn the most public attention, the university has seen a range of other protests this fall due to decisions by administrators under Wolfe’s leadership. The issues faced by students and employees go far beyond the single-issue focus on race promoted by Concerned Citizen 1950.

In August, just 13 hours before graduate students’ health insurance was set to expire, the university announced it was cutting subsidies for their plans. The university backtracked and agreed to cover the students’ health insurance through fellowships. But the administration’s actions have fueled a drive by graduate students to unionize to defend their rights.

Connor Lewis, co-chair of the Coalition of Graduate Workers at MU, told examiner.com that the university pays its graduate student employees less than the national average. “I personally know people who have sold blood and plasma just to get by,” Lewis said. “We want to be better compensated so we can be better educators.”

The College Board report released November 4 found that undergraduate tuition at Missouri’s public, four-year colleges and universities has increased by 8 percent since 2010.

Conservative groups have also targeted MU’s relationship with Planned Parenthood, leading the university’s administration to cancel 10 contracts with the provider. As a result, medical and nursing students were blocked from getting training on some procedures they typically received at Planned Parenthood facilities.

A petition with 2,500 signatures last week called on the university to restore the Planned Parenthood contracts, as well as reverse a decision to revoke certain privileges at the university hospital for the only doctor in Columbia qualified to perform abortions.



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